

Children and Trauma: 2

Written Video Transcript

One of the most common reactions we see in children after a disaster is anxiety and fear. And that anxiety and fear may play itself out in terms of the children being afraid of being separated from the parents, so they may not want to go to school, for example. Children are also very sensitive to reminders of the disasters. [00:00.20.00] Children kind of slip back in their developmental level to an earlier stage of behaviors. It's not at all uncommon for children to develop stomachaches and headaches and skin rashes and to have more colds and allergies and so on. And often it's the school nurse who will pick up on this. Many times children are [00:00.40.00] having bad dreams at night. There may be nightmares about the disaster or they may be nightmares about other scary things. And it's fear of going to sleep that's keeping them from going to bed. For the teacher who's dealing with a child or children in the classroom who haven't been sleeping for a few days or a few weeks, or in some cases a few months, you can imagine [00:01.00.00] how that level of fatigue is interfering with the children's ability to concentrate and to learn in the classroom.

When assessing children we take into account not only their exposure to the traumatic event, which is critical, but we also look to take in the psychosocial history of the child—[00:01.20.00] that is, what previous stressors or significant losses they've had in their life.

A few years ago at one of the schools in the city of Stockton an individual walked onto the playground and used an automatic weapon, opened fire, and injured over 20 [00:01.40.00] children and killed five children. Most of the children that were injured and all of the children that were killed were Southeast Asian. The importance of understanding the cultural background from which these children and families came from was enormously important. In some cultures children are taught that if you feel [00:02.00.00] pain or trauma you should express yourself. In other cultures you're taught not to express anger, not to express anguish, not to express pain. And in fact you're a better person if you're able to hold it all inside and not verbalize it.

[00:02.20.00] I feel good or feel bad.

You feel good or bad?

Yes. I feel bad.

Does it hurt real bad?

[2:27]



No? Were you afraid?

I feel bad.

[2:33] yeah.

How do you engage these children? Many of them were still struggling with English, have [00:02.40.00] not really been able to express themselves in the English language very well. So, it really requires people who are able to communicate effectively with the children.

People often ask, how long does recovery take? How long does this go on? And we found that most, in most children [00:03.00.00] and adults the anxiety reactions, the fear and anxiety and nervousness and so on, generally begin to subside after about six weeks to three months unless there are a lot of reminders. What takes much longer is the grief that's involved, the sadness that people feel. Because recovery from disaster is about loss. [00:03.20.00] And for children it's a loss of that confident belief that the world is a safe and secure place. And it takes time to get over those losses. There are certain times during the first year of recovery when people may experience a reawakening of some of their reactions, [00:03.40.00] anxiety reactions, and their feelings of grief. And those times include around the six month anniversary. They may occur around holiday times. And they certainly occur around the time of the one year anniversary. What's also important is that the anniversary provides people with a natural opportunity [00:04.00.00] to look back. To look back at not only what happened a year ago today and what the losses were, but to look back on how far we've come over this past year. And it's a time when people can truly begin to experience themselves no longer as victims but as survivors.

The [00:04.20.00] topic we worked on toward the end of the first year was a very simple task that was referred to as a gains and loss collage. And it gave a structured approach for survivors and siblings to look at their lives at that moment, somewhere around eight months [00:04.40.00] after the bus crash, and to see what changed for them. They were surprised to find out that what they put down on their gains side of the collage was not always good. Some of the things they put down on the loss side was not always bad.

[end of audio]

